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THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

Volume XVI

JULY, 1912

Number 3

THE PRESENT POSITION OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY IN GREAT BRITAIN: A STUDY OF TENDENCIES

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It has sometimes happened to a holiday-maker by the shore of lake or sea that while he was looking out upon some placid bay a big steamer passed, a long distance from the coast, almost without attracting his attention; then, quite awhile after the boat had disappeared round the headland, its passing forgotten, there came the swell from its paddle or screw—wave upon crested wave breaking against the shore, causing not a little commotion among the small craft moored in the harbor. Something similar to this familiar phenomenon is going on in the world of theology today. Certain towering hulls, bearing the names of great pioneers along a variety of lines of research, have passed beyond our horizon some time since; but it is only now that the swell they created is being properly felt—the rollers are dashing themselves against the theologic shore, causing much stir and some incidental discomfort, especially among the occupants of the lesser and lighter boats which never venture into very deep water at any time. Dropping the language of metaphor, the religious phenomenon of our day is the advent of liberal theology as a factor to be reckoned with, and one that is making itself ever more widely felt. Today it is possible to say that liberal theology has arrived; and the moment may be opportune for such a study as will be attempted in the following pages.

It is quite true that the very contention thus put forward is being vigorously challenged. Thus, e.g., Professor Burkitt, of Cambridge, in proclaiming the "failure of liberal Christianity," maintains that the most flourishing period of liberal theological views coincided with the vogue of Tennyson, and especially of *In Memoriam*, and that "the decline of interest in Tennyson's poetry is the measure of the decline of liberal Christianity as a vital force." This seems to us an extraordinary misreading of past and present alike. Tennyson's poetry can take care of itself; here it suffices to point out that while *In Memoriam* was published in 1850, the very mild theological liberalism of *Essays and Reviews* provoked a storm ten years later; that Colenso's *Pentateuch* (1862) caused its author to be inhibited from preaching in nearly every English diocese; and that the publication of Farrar's *Eternal Hope* in 1877 was the signal for prolonged and furious controversy. To suggest, in view of these dates, which tell their own story, that the maximum expansion of liberal Christianity fell in the mid-Victorian era, while today we are assisting at its decline and fall, is to indulge a somewhat desperate taste for paradox; the facts are otherwise.

I

What, then, are the facts—what has happened, and why does so temperamentally cautious a theologian as Dr. Sanday declare in his recent work on *Christologies Ancient and Modern* that "we must modernize, whether we will or no"? The answer may be supplied by quoting the words of a competent and at the same time highly conservative observer like Sir W. Robertson Nicoll, who in 1907 summed up the case in the formula: "The new philosophy, the new criticism, the new science are compelling a restatement of the Christian faith." Let us show very briefly how these various forces, by exercising a kind of simultaneous pressure, have created a new situation, and especially a new outlook.

We should place foremost among those forces the scientific, i.e., critical, study of history—the general adoption of the attitude described by Ranke in his grandly simple saying: "Ich will nur sagen wie es eigentlich gewesen ist." As Professor Bury expressed

it in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge: "Before the beginning of the last century the study of history was not scientific. . . . The transformation of history involved in the recognition that the study of history must be pursued by rigorously scientific methods—a transformation not yet complete—is a great event in the history of the world." Certainly, the extension of this principle to the historical documents of Christianity has been a great event in the evolution of theology; more particularly the application of scientific historical methods to the study of the Gospels has been for theologians "a school of honesty." We shall presently give the reader some illustrations of the results achieved, or in process of achievement, by these methods.

Again, the immense impetus given to the study of physical science within the last two generations has reacted with tremendous force upon theology, and that not merely by calling in question, say, the accuracy of the stories of creation and the fall as told in Genesis, but by altering our whole prepossessions. Modern science has literally given us a new heaven and a new earth, and the sheer force of facts and of logic has brought it home to us that to the unimaginably vast universe we inhabit many of the older religious conceptions are—like the outgrown clothes of our childhood—no longer adequate. More particularly has it to be said that science has changed the modern attitude toward the miraculous. Without dogmatically stating that miracles are impossible—or even, with Matthew Arnold, that they "do not happen"—such events have never been felt to be so *improbable* as today. The average person is not at all a man of science; but he lives and moves in an atmosphere impregnated with science, whose first presupposition—always verified and never falsified by experience—is the uniformity of nature. The result is that the modern mind approaches the miraculous with a novel caution; what is sometimes rather plaintively referred to as a bias against miracles is in reality simply the feeling—unavoidable under the altered circumstances—that such occurrences ought to be supported by very strong and unimpeachable evidence in order to command belief. In a word, miracles, once the witnesses most confidently relied upon to demonstrate the truth of the Christian revelation, are now recognized as stand-

ing themselves in special need of attestation: it is a question of *quis custodiet ipsos custodes*—who shall verify these verifiers?

And this impression has been deepened by the new science of comparative religion, which in widening our horizon has also presented us with fresh problems. When we read of the supernatural birth of the Buddha, of the shining light and the heavenly chorus of praise attending that event, of a venerable sage foretelling the future greatness of the holy babe on his name-day; when we are told of his temptation, his power over the demons, his miraculous feeding of a multitude, his transfiguration in the presence of two disciples; when we learn that the death and resurrection of a savior-divinity is a feature of many oriental religions, and that these stories often present remarkable similarities of detail to those in the Gospels: it would be strange indeed if such parallels did not raise new questionings in the place of old certainties. If accounts of miraculous births and resurrections are plainly fabulous when we meet with them in other faiths, are they necessarily historical when they occur in the Christian Scriptures? At any rate we feel that stringent evidence will be required to prove them so.

If the influence of philosophy in the liberalizing of theology is less directly traceable than that of criticism and science, it has been none the less real and powerful. The renewed stress laid on the doctrine of divine immanence has altered the current view of God's relation to the world and to man; instead of thinking of the Deity as far remote from the universe, of the world as normally—but for the occasional irruption of miracle—allowed to go its own way, and of man as by nature alienated from God, we have come to see God revealed in and through the universe, and man as consubstantial—homogenous—with God, lit by a divine spark within him, a partaker of the divine substance. The idea of God's constant presence, his constant revelation, the Providence of unfailing law, has had far-reaching effects: for if God has always been in the world and with man, it is hard to see how either world or man could ever have got into so hopeless a condition as is implied in the orthodox scheme of salvation. If the universe is not a mechanism but an organism, thrilled and pervaded by an eternal energy that "worketh even until now," then we shall be less inclined to expect

on occasional spasmodic manifestation of the Deity in the shape of some physical portent, but look for his action—in Sir Oliver Lodge's phrase—"if at all, then always."

To Sir W. Robertson Nicoll's catalogue of the forces of change—"the new philosophy, the new criticism, the new science"—we have to add a fourth, and not the least powerful, viz., the new ethical temper of the age. It is this which has put an end to the doctrine of everlasting punishment; this which abolished the doctrine of predestination and election as formulated in the *decre-
tum horribile* of Calvin: *Non pari conditione creantur omnes; sed aliis vita aeterna, aliis damnatio aeterna, praeordinatur.* It is due to the same ethical temper that—to quote the words of Dr. Ballard, the eminent Methodist theologian—"the doctrine of the atonement is no more proclaimed with that fearful, offhand, mercantile assurance by which, in years gone by, God the Father and God the Son were arrayed against each other with all the dramatic effect of an innocent victim pleading with a tyrant. The old dreadful reiteration of 'the blood,' 'the blood,' has given place to appeals more impressive for human hearts because less shocking to human minds." Indeed, the whole transactional view of the atonement, with its talk of "imputed righteousness" and substitutionary punishment, is being increasingly abandoned, because it is not ethical enough, not *good* enough; it has had to be moralized, and therefore to be modernized.

II

That the forces so hurriedly enumerated rather than surveyed have jointly and severally forced on the advent of liberal theology is in the present writer's view "clear as the day and evident as the sun"; if we single out for slightly more detailed treatment some of the effects of biblical criticism upon theology, it is because this is the field in which those effects can be most unmistakably demonstrated—and also because it is in this field that the battle, in its present phase, is being fought out.

So far as the Old Testament is concerned, that battle is by this time won, the completeness of the victory being brought into fuller relief by the unavailing efforts of a few theological die-hards to

move the theological clock back. That the critical views for which Robertson Smith suffered barely a generation ago should today have become the commonplaces of Old Testament study is as significant as it is, to progressives, gratifying; but even more remarkable, because less to be expected, is the advance—of course, far more recent—achieved in the application of critical principles and methods to the New Testament. Staunch conservatives of the old school, like Canon Liddon in the last generation, were, after all, from their own standpoint, clear sighted enough in opposing an emphatic *non possumus* to the Old Testament critic, declaring that if the Book of Daniel were admitted to be a production of the second, and not of the sixth, century B.C., the end of all things—the things they stood for—was at hand; for if the critic were once allowed within the sacred inclosure of the canon at all, on what grounds—or with what effectiveness—could you issue a ukase of “hands off” so far as the New Testament was concerned?

Those defenders of the old order, therefore, who preached the doctrine of *principiis obsta* were right, according to their lights, and if they were with us today, would have the melancholy satisfaction of saying, “We told you so.” Developments have, indeed, been rapid, and illustrations are only too plentiful to show how all along the line the tide of New Testament criticism has been advancing. Thus we have Professor Sanday—whom we already quoted as admitting the necessity of modernizing—declaring that “we may be sure that if the [gospel] miracles of the first century had been wrought before trained spectators of the twentieth, the version of them would be *quite different*”¹—a very far-reaching admission when we consider all that is implied in the words we have italicized. Thus, again, we read in a by no means revolutionary work like Hastings’ *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, in reference to the angelic annunciations of the Savior’s birth, the angels’ song that greeted the nativity, the voice from heaven, and the descent of the dove at his baptism, that “we are free to admit that they were such as were not unlikely to be added to the gospel tradition by disciples and by the first Christian community”—a statement which surely leaves us “free to admit” that other mirac-

¹ *Outlines of the Life of Christ*, 104.

ulous features in the gospel record besides those mentioned may have been similarly "added." On the miracle of the cursing of the figtree it is remarked in the same work that "the majority of critics are disposed to regard it as a mere endowment of the Lukan parable of the Barren Figtree with concrete form," and that "the incident of the cursing is encumbered with inherent improbabilities." On the Book of Jonah, which Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* places among "the category of symbolical narratives," the *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* observes that it "can certainly be held without belittling our Lord's divinity" that he "cited details from the story of Jonah as facts, he himself thinking them to be facts," even "on the supposition that the book is not historical, but a fictitious narrative with a didactic purpose." What would Liddon, to whom the mild concessions made to Old Testament criticism by the *Lux Mundi* school were anathema, have thought of such a surrender, by evangelical scholarship, not only of the historicity of Jonah *per se*, but of that historicity as attested by Jesus Christ? Must it not be said that the alleged "bias against the miraculous"—i.e., the stronger insistence on satisfactory evidence, and the disposition to withhold belief in the absence of such evidence—is no longer confined to German theologians?

All this grows doubly clear when we consider what has been happening lately in relation to the doctrine of the virgin birth. Until the other day held as one of the "things most surely believed," that doctrine is today more and more generally treated as an "open question"—an expression which we may be forgiven for classing among the diplomatic phrases of theology, heralding retreat and surrender. "It has been," says Mr. Brierley, the most popular of English religious essayists, "a mistake of orthodoxy, from which it is time Christian thought finally rid itself, to base its doctrine of incarnation on the notion of a virgin birth. . . . The birth stories of Matthew and Luke fail to approve themselves as of authority."² That an author addressing so large a public should use such uncompromising language, and that without calling forth angry protests, is itself a sign of the times. But let us take a writer who is considered many degrees less advanced than Mr. Brierley,

² *Our City of God*, 31-32.

viz., Dr. Horton, and hear what he has to say on the same subject. He remarks in his commentary on Matthew's Gospel:

No wise person will presume to say that they [the birth stories] are untrue; but a man may be a Christian without holding that they are facts of history. History in the strict sense of the word begins where Mark and Paul and John begin. The idyl of the infancy belongs to another kind of literature. . . . Poetry is as instructive as history, but not in the same way. . . . The divinity of Jesus does not rest on his physical origin, but on his moral and spiritual character. . . . If the divinity of Jesus rested on it [the virgin birth] we should indeed be in a perilous way. . . . The part that his human father had in his birth is a secret over which reverence and delicacy will draw a veil [pp. 5-9].

All this may be said to be vague and inconclusive; but when a doctrine which for all these centuries has been regarded as essential is suddenly declared to be of secondary importance only, we know that there must be good and even urgent reasons for such a change of front. The reason is that the evidence is seen not to satisfy modern standards. And when even the ultra-orthodox, Anglo-Catholic *Church Times* of December 21, 1911, while defending the virgin birth, states that belief in it "is in no way essential to a right faith in the incarnation," we may be tolerably certain that the end of this particular controversy is in sight, and that judgment will presently be given by "consent."

It will suffice for our purpose if we point to yet another direction in which the progress of modern criticism must affect and profoundly modify theology, viz., in its estimate of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel. It is a symptom of the first importance when Dr. Moffatt, in his recent *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, quietly excludes this gospel from the historical documents, and reserves it for separate treatment in another portion of his work. That he assigns it to a date incompatible with a Johannine authorship is of only secondary interest in comparison, for it is not with the authenticity so much as with the historicity of the Fourth Gospel—or with the first only for the sake of the second—that we are in any vital sense concerned. The traditional contention has always been that, since this work was the composition of an apostle and an eyewitness, its contents must be historical: the legitimate method of approaching the problem is, on

the contrary, to inquire whether the Fourth Evangelist related history, since only if this preliminary question is answered in the affirmative can we possibly see in him one of the Twelve, or at any rate think of him as a contemporary of Jesus.

Now for the first time in British scholarship is there a marked and growing tendency to treat the Johannine problem not apologetically but objectively, and where this is done there is a surrender of the historical character of the Fourth Gospel. When one remembers all the learned and ingenious attempts made in the past to defend the contents of that gospel, *bon gré, mal gré*, as a record of fact—attempts which lend too much color to Schweitzer's gibe at "obstructive erudition" as "the special prerogative of theology"—one appreciates the magnitude of the change which is accomplishing itself under our very eyes. Even a theological moderate like Professor Denney admits nowadays that "it is so difficult in the Gospel according to John to distinguish between the mind of the writer and that of the subject that it could only be used inconclusively in the present inquiry"³—viz., into the self-revelation of Jesus in the Gospels. More startling is the blunt statement of Professor Burkitt that the Fourth Evangelist's suppression of the institution of the communion, and his substitution of the washing of the disciples' feet, is "a deliberate sacrifice of historical truth."⁴ One wonders what would have happened to Professor Burkitt, had he made such a pronouncement in what he regards as the golden age of liberal Christianity, fifty years ago; but the simple fact is that he would not have made it.

But let us take another and more crucial instance. Of all the miracles attributed to Christ the greatest is confessedly the raising of Lazarus, which is found exclusively in the Fourth Gospel. None has greater theological significance, and none has been more stoutly and even desperately defended. Yet here are two British scholars of the front rank delivering themselves to the following effect upon this narrative. Professor E. F. Scott says:

We cannot, with any show of probability, find room for it in an intelligible scheme of the life of Christ. It is inconceivable that a miracle of such magnitude, performed in the one week of our Lord's life of which we have a full record,

³ *Jesus and the Gospel*, 174.

⁴ *The Gospel History and Its Transmission*, 225.

and in presence of crowds of people in a suburb of Jerusalem—a miracle, moreover, which was the immediate cause, according to John, of the crucifixion—should have been simply passed over by the other evangelists. We are almost compelled to the conclusion that the narrative is in the main symbolical.⁵

Professor Burkitt says:

If the events occurred as told in the Fourth Gospel, if they were as public as the Fourth Evangelist insists, so fraught with influence upon the action both of friends and foes, they could not have been unknown to a well-informed personage like Mark, nor could he have had any reason for suppressing a narrative at once so public and so edifying. . . . Must not the answer be that Mark is silent about the raising of Lazarus because he did not know of it? And if he did not know of it, can we believe that, as a matter of fact, it occurred? It is, I am persuaded, impossible to regard the story of the raising of Lazarus as a narrative of historical events.⁶

We need hardly trouble the reader with further quotations in support of the conclusion we are trying to commend to him: when—as is inevitable—it becomes generally known that in the view of eminent Christian scholars the Fourth Gospel, though priceless as a spiritual interpretation of the person and mind of Christ, is in the main not history, must not such a conclusion act as a solvent upon the traditional theology? If the various changes of attitude, front, and emphasis we have so rapidly described do not indicate a corresponding strengthening of the position of liberal theology, then we confess ourselves entirely at a loss to read these signs of the times.

If, however, anything were needed to assure us as to the accuracy of our diagnosis, we should derive such assurance from the various attempts that are being made to show that liberal theology, liberal Christianity, liberal Protestantism, have failed, or collapsed, or otherwise come to grief. Death as a rule presents unmistakable symptoms, and does not require laborious demonstration; on the other hand, a school of thought or body of opinions that has to be vigorously argued against, by that very fact proves its vitality—or its opponents perform that service on its behalf, for who would waste time in slaying the dead? The eagerness exhibited in some quarters at present to pronounce funeral orations over the liberal movement in theology, is itself a most encouraging symptom—for

⁵ *The Fourth Gospel*, 37.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 222-23.

liberal theologians; as for those who, all unbidden, come to bury Caesar, if not to praise him, they might profitably ponder the advance achieved within less than a generation in matters theological, when perhaps they come to the conclusion that *Così non soglion fare i piè de' morti.*

The attack upon the liberal position proceeds in the main, and in spite of some overlapping, along three lines, which may be respectively described as the *skeptical*, the *scriptural*, and the *eschatological*. It is argued, i.e., by some that a thoroughgoing criticism of the Gospels leaves us with a "historical Jesus" who matters so little that it is not he, but the supra-historical, metaphysical Christ who is the true reality, the true basis of Christianity; by others, that if we will only let the New Testament speak for itself, we shall see that the figure there presented to us is the Christ, not of liberal theology, but of traditional evangelicalism; while others yet declare that an unbiased criticism discloses the Christ, not of liberal Protestantism, but of Catholicism. With each of these three contentions we must now proceed to deal.

III

The paradoxical—and at heart essentially skeptical—attempt to save the Christ of dogma at the expense of the Jesus of history is one of those enterprises which will always exercise a fascination of its own over a certain order of intelligences. It is not new, for, as Professor Bacon reminds us, Cerinthus and the Docetic Gnostics of the second century already "distinguished between the aeonian Christ and the historic Jesus, regarding the latter as religiously a *quantité négligeable*"; nevertheless, this highly fantastic game is being played once more today, and that with extraordinary zest and audacity. No living theologian probably exhibits these qualities, allied with astonishing intellectual verve and brilliancy, in greater measure than Dr. Forsyth, the renowned principal of Hackney College, London; few Christian teachers, we imagine, have expressed themselves concerning the Synoptic Jesus in terms so little appreciative.

Truth to say, the reason of Dr. Forsyth's "imperfect sympathy"—to borrow Charles Lamb's euphemism—with the Jesus of the

Synoptists is not far to seek. That Jesus is, if not like, yet too like the Jesus of liberal theology. He is a teacher, to begin with; and moreover he gives a kind of teaching which lays no stress upon—indeed, practically ignores—that which in Dr. Forsyth's view was his whole and sole *raison d'être*, viz., his death, or rather Paul's interpretation of that death, or, to be still more accurate, Dr. Forsyth's interpretation of Paul's doctrine. This teaching, so unsatisfactory from his point of view, he accordingly sets himself systematically to deprecate in his treatise on *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*. He has discovered—like the Rev. R. Roberts, of *Jesus or Christ?* notoriety—that “there was in his [i.e., Jesus'] mere thought or precept little that was new or original” (p. 64); “what made the church” was “not the teaching of Jesus. That teaching was only preserved from oblivion by the existence of a church founded on another base” (p. 125); it was “occasional and sometimes transitory,” having reference to “an incomplete situation, a raw audience, and an inchoate context of events” (p. 118). What really and what exclusively mattered was his death—the finishing of his work by the cross; but this truth “was not always perfectly certain in Christ's earthly thought”—he was mistaken about it “even in Gethsemane” (p. 167); the truth about himself which he missed was left to be discovered by the apostles, who “gave the meaning of Christ in a way that the earthly Christ himself could not” (p. 166). “The apostolic inspiration,” therefore—in other words Paulinism—“takes as much precedence of his earthly and (partly) interim teaching as the finished work is more luminous than the work in progress” (p. 168). The preaching activity of the Lord—his proclamation of the kingdom, the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, and the rest—all this, we are given not obscurely to understand, was essentially futile: “the result of his life and teaching was that they all forsook him and fled” (p. 326). Paul did right, therefore, in treating his Lord's ministry as hardly worth mention, laying all the emphasis on the “one thing needful”—the cross—for in this case the disciple really was, a certain gospel saying notwithstanding, greater than his Master.

Now the sheer daring of Dr. Forsyth's *plaideroy*—and he is a

great advocate—must not blind us for a moment to the radical unsoundness of his case. For if “a deeper knowledge of the Judaism of Christ’s times forces on us the conviction that there was in his mere thought and teaching little that was new and original”; if “it can mostly be gathered from contemporary Judaic ideas”—an odd tribute of respect for a Christian to deposit at his Lord’s feet!—certain questions inevitably arise. If this body of teaching contained nothing very new, then why was it received as a novelty? Why did the common people hear him gladly, and how did they discern that he spoke with authority, and not as the scribes? Of all the strange paradoxes, surely one of the strangest is this, that there was nothing in the sayings of Jesus to startle anyone—only, everyone was violently startled; that he said nothing but what any instructed Jew was familiar with, but that the instructed Jews of the period promptly put him to death for echoing the commonplaces of their culture! And the whole baseless contention is shattered into fragments by the one revolutionary refrain: “Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time—but I say unto you.” As Mr. Claude G. Montefiore, the distinguished Jewish scholar—who knows perhaps as much about the Judaism of Christ’s time as Dr. Forsyth—says:

Even if you could find separate close parallels for nine hundred and seventy out of, say, the thousand verses in the gospel in which Jesus is the speaker, and even if you put them together and made a nice little book of them, you would not have produced a substitute of equal religious value. The unity, the aroma, the spirit, the genius, would all have fled. Or, rather, you could not infuse *them* into your elegant collection of fragments and tid-bits.⁷

To put it quite frankly, liberal theology has little to fear from an anti-liberalism which, in order to make out its case, has to disparage the teaching of him who spake as never man spake—that teaching which would not have been preserved so religiously but from men’s instinctive sense of its surpassing preciousness, and which will retain its fragrance and its power in undiminished measure, long after the subtlest volume of Pauline dogmatics has crumbled into dust.

More recently, Dr. Forsyth has given us an interesting glimpse

⁷ *The Synoptic Gospels*, I, p. cv.

into his mind by stating that "mere historicism works out, as in Drews, to sheer skepticism." That is an amazing proposition, backed up by an amazing reference. It means, if it means anything at all, that if we apply the historical method (which has been of such service to liberal theology) rigorously enough, we arrive in due course at nothing at all; and for proof of this dictum we are pointed to so thoroughly worthless and unscholarly a production as Drews's *Christ Myth*. Surely when orthodoxy seeks support from skepticism of the wilder sort, we are reminded that "misery acquaints a man with strange bed-fellows." Anybody could have told Dr. Forsyth that Drews reaches his skeptical conclusions, not by the application of any sound historical method, but by the wildest guesses, the most reckless assertions, the most childish etymologies. Drews's method, in a word, is not "merehistoricism"; it is mere charlatanism, and it takes Dr. Forsyth to identify the two. The explanation, once more, is that "mere historicism"—as a nickname for the historical method—has to be cried down, in order that mere dogmatism may be cried up. That a free and objective historical inquiry into the gospel records does not "work out to skepticism" at all, let Schweitzer attest when he says:

There are few characters of antiquity about whom we possess so much indubitably historical information, of whom we have so many authentic discourses. The position is much more favorable, for instance, than in the case of Socrates; for he is depicted for us by literary men who exercised their creative ability upon the portrait. Jesus stands much more immediately before us, because he was depicted by simple Christians without literary gifts.⁸

The skeptical argument against liberal theology—of which Dr. Forsyth is the leading exponent in this country—would persuade us that the criticism of the Gospels leaves us little but a pallid and ineffective figure, whose thought and teachings had little originality or claim to remembrance—one of whom it might be said that "nothing in his life became him like the leaving it," and who did not understand the meaning even of his death; and that under the circumstances we had better accept a hyper-Paulinism as the only alternative. To such a reading of the facts we confidently oppose the verdict of scholars who have made the subject of gospel criti-

⁸ *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 6.

cism their own, as Dr. Forsyth has not—scholars like Harnack, von Soden, Jülicher, Weinel, Holtzmann, Schmiedel, Bousset, and a host of others; such men, who have devoted years of indefatigable industry to the elucidation of these problems, do not share Dr. Forsyth's despairing conclusions, or his low estimate of "the earthly Christ."

IV

Totally different from the skeptical is the scriptural argument against the conclusions of liberal theology, as developed by Professor Denney in his learned and painstaking treatise *Jesus and the Gospel*. Where the former depreciates the Jesus of the Synoptics in order to exalt the Pauline Christology, the latter seeks, by dint of minute and careful examination, to determine "whether the interpretation of Christ which is current in the church is that which is really yielded by the primitive witnesses"; and the conclusion is reached that the Christ of the New Testament—the Jesus of history—is not that of liberal theology, but of traditional evangelicism.

We cannot, of course, undertake to enter into any detailed criticism of this large and learned volume; but we would, in the first place, respectfully suggest that though the author explicitly "disclaims any apologetic intention," he again and again shows himself, however unintentionally, swayed by a subconscious, apologetic purpose, and the presence of that purpose continually affects his argument.

Is there not, e.g., the apologetic motive clearly seen in such a statement as this: "In the practical sense of believing in him they [i.e., the earliest believers] all confessed his Godhead"? (p. 12). Quite apart from the question of the deity of our Lord, is it legitimate simply to equate belief in him with confession of his Godhead? And when only two pages farther on the author quotes Peter's description of his master as "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved unto you by miracles and signs which God wrought through him," it is impossible not to wonder how, in view of the Christology expressed in so representative a passage, Dr. Denney can make his earlier assertion as to the confession he ascribes to all the primitive believers.

Again, a sentence like the following: "There cannot be another to whom all the prophets bear witness" (p. 17), breathes the spirit, not of objective inquiry, but of subjective devotion. *Do* all the prophets bear witness to Jesus? When Dr. Denney comes to examine Matthew's "proofs" from prophecy, he admits readily enough that many of them "are to us unconvincing," and the argument from prophecy becomes simply "the argument that the Old Testament and the New are continuous, and that what God is preparing in the one he has achieved in the other" (p. 64). But that is something very different from the earlier statement.

Once more, it is the apologist rather than the student who tells us that our Lord "does not stand with us . . . sharing our worship and our needs, offering on his own behalf the prayers we offer on ours" (p. 94); the ordinary reader of the Gospels, with no case to prove, is perfectly conscious that the evangelists represent Jesus as habitually praying to God, dependent in everything upon God—so even in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 5:19, 30; 8:28)—and that in Gethsemane he offered on his own behalf just such a prayer as many tortured souls have sent up on theirs.

When we come to Dr. Denney's chapter on the resurrection, we venture to think that his apologetic bias fairly "leaps to the eyes." "So far as the fact of the resurrection of Jesus is concerned," we read, "the narratives of the evangelists are quite the least important part of the evidence with which we have to deal. . . . The real historical evidence for the resurrection is the fact that it was believed, preached, propagated, and produced its fruit and effect in the new phenomenon of the Christian church long before any of our gospels were written" (p. 111).

Is not this an implicit admission that the evidence of the Gospels is not conclusive, and is it not a hazardous principle to advance that *belief* in an occurrence is historical *evidence* for that occurrence? Where would the application of such an axiom lead us to? "The third day," Dr. Denney says, "was the first day of the week, and every Sunday as it comes round is a new argument for the resurrection" (p. 113). "The New Testament references to the first day of the week as the Lord's day are weighty arguments for the historical resurrection" (p. 114). But the resurrection of Osiris,

too, was celebrated on the third day following his death; and if Dr. Denney really looks upon the references to the Lord's day in Acts and Revelation as "weighty arguments for the historical resurrection," one wonders what are the arguments he would consider as less weighty or even negligible!

The circumstance, however, that the learned author of *Jesus and the Gospel* is less innocent of bias than he believes himself to be, is of only secondary importance compared with the fact that the whole underlying assumption on which he rests his argument seems to us a gigantic *petitio principii*. That underlying assumption is quite simply the identification, implied throughout, of "the Jesus of the New Testament" and "the Jesus of history." But this, surely, is the very point in dispute. No critic of the liberal school would for a moment maintain that even the earliest of our New Testament witnesses present us with a picture of Jesus every feature of which is historically beyond question; his contention is precisely that some of the features in the very earliest portraits of Jesus are unhistorical. As Mr. Brierley has well expressed it:

The great trouble of the modern investigator is the haziness of the old-world witnesses as to the difference between a fact and an imagination. To reach our fact we have to struggle through two thick fog-banks. First, there is that of the second-hand, hearsay character of our evidence. In pre-scientific times the story as it passes from mouth to mouth continually changes form. . . . But when we have got through this fog-wall; when, through the region of second- or third-hand reports, we have reached our first-hand witness, we are not even then in clear daylight. Our first-hand witness may have a fog in his own brain. What is his capacity for seeing the thing before him, and reporting it?⁹

All this seems obvious and elementary; and hence we confess that we are not quite sure what is thought to be accomplished by the demonstration that "the interpretation of Christ which is current in the church is that which is really yielded by the primitive witnesses." That interpretation was formulated in the days when the testimony of the primitive witnesses was taken at its face-value, without deduction or discrimination; and that is just the attitude which, to us, has become impossible. As a restatement

⁹ *Our City of God*, 40-41.

of the scriptural position—patient, exhaustive, unfailingly serene and gracious in spirit—a book like *Jesus and the Gospel* is entitled to respect; as an argument against liberal theology it proves nothing to those who do not share the author's premisses.

V

Quite recently, however, there has come upon the scene a new and revolutionary interpretation of the gospel history and its central figure, an interpretation which has been received with enthusiasm in some quarters one would not at first sight have imagined ready to welcome anything so startling. We are referring to the eschatological theory, whose principal champion, Dr. Schweitzer, in his volume on *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, announced the discovery that the one feature or element in the Gospels, which explains the personality and the earthly career of our Lord is to be found in those sayings of His, which express the expectation of the impending end of the age. According to Schweitzer, Jesus regarded the kingdom of God eschatologically, i.e., purely as a supernatural event to be consummated in the immediate future. From the days of the Baptist a number of persons—the “men of violence”—had been forcing on that great consummation, a host of penitents wringing this supreme boon from God, so that it was “at hand,” and might appear at any moment. Jesus' own purpose was “to set in motion the eschatological development of history, to let loose the final woes, the confusion and strife from which shall issue the Parousia, and so to introduce the supra-mundane phase of the eschatological drama.” It was with this object in view that he sent out the Twelve, and ultimately went to Jerusalem, resolved to die, in order to compel the advent of the kingdom, whose coming had to be preceded by tribulation. It was because he firmly believed himself to be the future Messiah—in the eschatological sense of Dan. 7:13—that he designated John the Baptist as the Elijah; but he closely guarded the secret of his messiahship from all and sundry. That secret was revealed to Peter, James, and John in a moment of ecstatic rapture, and subsequently, contrary to the Lord's expressed wishes, disclosed to the rest of the disciples by Peter. In the eyes of the inhabitants of Jerusalem the entry into

the capital was no messianic entry, or the fact would have been adduced at the trial of Jesus as proof of his messianic claims; but the high priest knew of those claims, for it was this, the messianic secret, and not the Master's place of concealment, that Judas had betrayed to the authorities.

Such a violent reconstruction, we repeat, might have been expected to arouse the utmost distrust among conservative British theologians; as a matter of fact, it has created something of a *furore*. "I wonder," said Professor von Dobschütz, in his lectures on *The Eschatology of the Gospels*, "I wonder how it happened that this theory met with much more appreciation in England than in Germany, where even Schweitzer's friends were rather surprised by the one-sidedness of his views, and declined to follow him" (p. 57). The answer is that the eschatological theory was a veritable godsend to the opponents of liberal theology—the first stroke of good fortune they had known for years, the first setback to criticism of the modern school. If this theory was true, then the liberal critics had been altogether at fault in their reading of the Gospels, and as representatives of a movement they were discredited—*blamiert*, as they say in Germany. *The eschatological hypothesis was welcomed in England because it seemed to signify "the failure of liberal christianity."* If the real purpose of Jesus was not to teach a new and loftier law of conduct, that proved *pro tanto* what Professor Burkitt calls the "Catholick" view of Christ; for, as he pointed out, "the picture of our Lord sketched in the Creed does not fit the Christ of liberal Christianity at all. . . . There is nothing in the Creed about Christ as a teacher of the higher morality—in fact, he is not spoken of as a teacher at all." *Ergo*, Schweitzer's view, which shifted the emphasis from the gospel teaching to eschatology, relegating the former to a secondary place, was a triumph for the Creed and for "Catholicks"; once more the stone which the builders rejected had become the head of the corner.

How much ground is there for these rejoicings? Or rather, how much truth is there in Schweitzer's hypothesis? We think that its author has done a real service in drawing attention to an element in the Gospels which it had been customary to ignore;

it seems to us proved that eschatological conceptions entered into our Lord's outlook to a greater degree than had been commonly recognized by modern theologians. So far so good; but when Schweitzer asks us to believe that eschatological expectations supplied the exclusive motive-power, and furnish the sole explanation, for the public ministry of Jesus, and that nothing else in the Gospels matters but this, we are irresistibly reminded of a reflection of his own—à propos of someone else, of course—"Who ever discovered a true principle without pressing its application too far?"

Our present purpose is to show and examine the use which has been made of the eschatological theory as a weapon with which to fight liberal theology; and the most outstanding example of that use is to be found in the late Father Tyrrell's book, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*. Let it be said that it would have been far more pleasant to write what will follow during the Modernist leader's lifetime; but the work itself appeared posthumously, and the accident of death can confer no exemption from criticism.

Tyrrell enjoyed—or rather, he anything but *enjoyed*—the mistaken sympathy extended to him by liberal Protestants who vaguely imagined that he was more or less on similar lines as they themselves, because he had been excommunicated by the Vatican; whereas he was particularly anxious to let it be understood that his Modernism was above everything else a protest against liberal Protestantism (p. xvii.) That being so, it is not without interest to gather together some evidence of the temper in which he envisaged his opponents; indeed, this is rather a needed preliminary. Let a few illustrations suffice. When a writer tells us that liberal Protestantism "is rather a system of religious ethics than a religion" (p. 66); that "in vindictively stifling transcendentalism, it has stifled the Jesus of history" (p. 89); when he informs his readers that liberal Protestants, in redrawing the picture of Jesus "could only find the German in the Jew; a moralist in a visionary; a professor in a prophet" (p. 42); when he drops, in referring to liberal Protestantism, the airy and disparaging phrase, "*so far as it admits another life at all*" (p. 78); when he asserts that those Protestants who escape the problems of the Catholic Modernists see in Christ "no more than the Moslem sees in Mohammed"

(p. xxi)—when a writer commits himself to such statements as these, we have no right to doubt his sincerity; at the same time he puts himself out of court as an unbiased or even reasonably fair judge of the position he attacks. It is well, we say, that Tyrrell placed his views of liberal Protestantism so unreservedly on record; by exhibiting the full extent of his prejudice he has placed his opponents under an obligation.

Tyrrell shared with Dr. Forsyth and the Rev. R. Roberts a somewhat slight esteem for Jesus as a religious teacher: quite in the style of these two writers—*tres faciunt collegium*—he lays it down that there was “nothing original in the righteousness preached by Jesus” (p. 51); nor indeed was there any occasion for such originality, since he “did not come to reveal a new ethics of this life.” But not only has Tyrrell rather a poor idea of the value of the moral teaching of our Lord, but he has a poor idea of the religious value of morality or righteousness of any sort; as is natural in one who believes that “it is only the sacraments that make us sons of God—morality can never do so” (p. 72). Of course, holding this view of the relative unimportance of conduct, believing that “a life of very average morality, with frequent sacraments, is more pleasing to God than a life of heroic morality without sacraments (*ibid.*), all his instincts are outraged by the importance attributed by liberal Protestants to the teaching of Jesus—those “unoriginal” and really negligible precepts and parables which the world, with strange perverseness of judgment, has thought worth preservation and admiration. Our Lord’s emphasis, we are told emphatically, was not on right-doing: “*What need of a new ethics for an expiring humanity?*” (P. 66.)

In this last sentence we get the core of Tyrrell’s contention: the real motive-power which actuated Jesus was his conviction of the fast-approaching end of the age—his whole thinking and course of action were dominated by eschatological conceptions. There were two sides to the gospel he proclaimed—“moralism” and “apocalypticism”; but of these the former was only “incidental,” while the latter was “central”; and liberal Protestantism, “having eliminated what was principal in the Gospel”—viz., apocalypticism, eschatology—and “retained what was but secondary and sub-

ordinate—the moral element,” has “stifled the Jesus of history” (pp. 88-89).

How a mind like Tyrrell’s convinced itself of the soundness of this position may well fill one with wonder; though really a writer who could soberly assert that Jesus taught man to be, until baptism, “possessed by Satan, in virtue of his natural birth” (p. 71), and that in acknowledging the divine authority of the ceremonial law our Lord was “at one with the Pharisees” (p. 75), proves himself to have been *un peu capable de tout*. We may approach Tyrrell’s theory of the “central apocalypticism” and the “incidental moralism” of the gospel from two points of view, viz., by asking, (a) Is it borne out by the facts of the case?—and (b) What if it were?

The first of these questions has been answered with scholarly fairness by Professor von Dobschütz in his *Eschatology of the Gospels*; and a perusal of his pages is sufficient to dispel the eschatological nightmare which filled Tyrrell with such strange rapture. In inquiring how much genuinely eschatological matter there is in the utterances of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, Dr. von Dobschütz shows that there is “plenty of evidence that sayings of Jesus were colored afterward by eschatological additions and changes (p. 80),” and pronounces the great apocalyptic discourse (Mark, chap. 13; Matt., chap. 24; Luke, chap. 21) “an eschatological addition to the original Jesus-tradition” (p. 90). As against the theory that our Lord regarded himself merely as destined to be the Messiah in the apocalyptic future, he points to his answer to the high priest’s question—“Tell us whether thou be the Christ”—“Thou hast said”—as sufficient proof to the contrary. Full weight is given to the genuine—and genuinely—eschatological sayings, which prove that Jesus looked forward to an imminent supernatural consummation of the age; but over against these are set passages like Luke 11:20; 17:21; Matt. 12:28, in which he declares that the kingdom, so far from being a merely eschatological conception, is already present—*ἐφθασε*—already in the midst—*ἐντος νυμῶν*—in a word, already realized. Moreover, all the eschatological elements taken together represent no more than a minute proportion of the sayings of Jesus; they are almost lost

among the main body of his utterances, which are of a non-eschatological, moral tenor. In the light of that obvious fact Tyrrell's audacious phrase about the "central apocalypticism" and "incidental moralism" of Jesus is seen to be not so much a perversion as an inversion of the truth. Of the thirty sayings common to Mark and Q—sayings which must have been the most widely circulated and appreciated of the Lord's—only seven have any eschatological tinge, while the rest are of an ethical character. One can only say that while in his depreciation of the religious value of morality Tyrrell may have been right or—as we think—deplorably wrong, in attributing the same view to Jesus he was simply blind.

But, we must now proceed to ask, what if it were indeed true that the only element in Christ's utterances which really mattered, or was characteristic of him, was that of eschatological expectation, the insistence upon the impending end of the world? In what way would the triumph of this theory—however detrimental to liberal theology—promote the traditional conception of Christ? Is it not plain that "if there was nothing in Jesus but eschatology," then, since those apocalyptic hopes and predictions have certainly been falsified by events, he was "a misguided enthusiast," and no more? For falsified they have been, every one. Not one of "those that stood by" lived to see the Son of Man coming in his glory. "This generation" did "pass away," and many generations since, without witnessing the great consummation. The disciples might have gone through the cities of Israel many times over before the Son of Man appeared in apocalyptic splendor, for he has not so appeared to this day. And assuming that Jesus sought, by his death, to force on the end, was he not the victim of a pathetic and miserable delusion? Where, in all this insistence on the eschatological element, lies the gain for orthodoxy? But, as a matter of fact, the attempt to interpret Jesus solely from the point of view of eschatology is a flagrant instance of that false generalization which has been well called the worst of all faults in method; while as a matter of history it is not liberal theology, with its rightful emphasis upon the teaching of our Lord, but eschatological Christianity which has utterly and unmistakably failed.

Utterly and unmistakably, for already in the New Testament

we see at what an early age those expectations of the approaching end became a stumbling-block, and had to be spiritualized, as in the closing verse of Matthew's Gospel, and in the Fourth Gospel generally. And when Tyrrell himself admits that "moreover, as a fact, this inward righteousness" preached by Jesus "*is the only sensible result of the Gospel*" (p. 61), he goes much farther than the majority of liberal theologians, for most of whom Christianity is not "a law of commandments contained in ordinances," but centers in the person of Christ, "God manifest in the flesh." And another question presses for an answer: If eschatology is the true core of Christ's message, how has Christianity as a thing in being survived all these centuries without it? And, on the other hand, what a comment upon its founder that the Christian church, from the sheer instinct of self-preservation, should have had to drop, as Tyrrell admits, what was central in his proclamation "as a troublesome accident"! (P. 61.) The fact is that those who harbor such ideas move in a realm of unrealities; this whole attempt to play off the eschatological theory against liberal theology is only a kind of *dernière cartouche* fired by a hard-pressed garrison—in effect, less a weapon of offense than a signal of distress. The truth of the matter cannot be better stated than by Professor von Dobschütz, when he says:

It is not only the amount of non-eschatological materials in the Gospels that forbids us to account for Jesus' whole life by his eschatology. It is at the same time the permanent value of his non-eschatological teachings that causes us to put them in the first rank. It is, lastly, the history of the Christian church, from its beginning in the Apostolic age to our own time, that proves the non-eschatological element to be essential.¹⁰

And when Tyrrell himself has to confess that it was the *righteousness* preached by Jesus—the righteousness in which he yet professes to see "nothing original"—that has "leavened and transformed humanity" (p. 61), we may well say, What need have we of further witnesses?

We have now concluded our survey of the three main arguments that are being urged against liberal theology in England today—the skeptical, the scriptural, and the eschatological—and there is little left to add. Of the three, the first and third are in our view

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 158.

intimately related; they are also destined, we are convinced, to pass away far sooner than the second. What may be the extent of the influence exercised by Tyrrell upon English Catholics—a small number, all told—we have no means of estimating; we do not imagine it to be considerable, nor can we think that his line of reasoning appeals to many non-Catholics in this country. Protestants, again, however highly they may regard the Apostle Paul, are not likely to be captivated by the plea—when they understand it—that Jesus' teaching counts for so little *per se*, and his interpretation of himself was so defective, that it is not he but Paul who takes rank as the real authority: they will still continue to say, "We would see Jesus," and yet again, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." Whatever savors of belittling the Jesus of the Gospels will fail, even when its avowed object is that of rescuing the Christ of the creeds.

It is therefore to be anticipated that for some time to come yet the scriptural school, represented by Professor Denney—the school which seeks merely to ascertain the testimony of the New Testament witnesses concerning Christ, and abides by that—will continue to form the strongest bulwark of theological traditionalism against theological liberalism. Only for some time to come, however: for the principle of unreservedly applying the canons and methods of historical criticism to the Gospels is gaining ground every day—it is wringing concessions, as we showed, even from conservative scholarship—it is certain of achieving the same ultimate triumph in the field of the New Testament as in that of the Old: and then?

Then, what but that liberal theology which, while surrendering as legendary accretions not a little that once passed as fact—which interprets as poetry some things that former generations regarded as history—retains its firm faith in that historic Jesus who is also the divine Christ, the sublime Teacher and Savior, who loved us and gave himself up for us, the Express Image of God's Substance, the Way, the Truth, and the Life? For that a genuine criticism will give us a less exalted estimate of him who is the central figure, not of the Gospels only but of humanity, is alike unfounded whether as a hope or fear.

To those who allege the failure of liberal theology, and seek consolation in composing anticipatory epitaphs upon it, we can only reply in the words of Socrates: "If this be death, then let me die again and again." These prophets of doom are doubtless sincere; so were those who busily predicted the discomfiture of Darwinism, and the speedy collapse of the "documentary" hypothesis of the composition of the Hexateuch. But prophecy is still the most gratuitous form of error; and the only forecasts worth taking seriously are those which are based upon a sufficiently wide, sufficiently dispassionate, and sufficiently intelligent survey of actual facts. To such exceptional qualities it would be presumption on our part to lay claim; if we nevertheless firmly believe in the coming triumph of liberal theology in this country, it is for the sole and simple reason that we can see *nothing to stop it*.